



Town of Amherst PARKING GARAGE PROJECT

Summary Report February 1997

This report summarizes current information and issues concerning the proposal to build a parking garage in downtown Amherst.

BACKGROUND

The October 1996 Town Meeting authorized \$15,000 to update designs for a downtown parking garage. The funds were requested to update a preliminary design for a parking garage behind CVS, developed in 1990 by the Amherst Parking Task Force and a team of consultants led by Arrowstreet, Inc.--a project that was the end product of decades of parking studies and proposals. However, Town Meeting expressed a strong interest in having downtown parking needs, garage siting and related issues re-examined.

State Funding

No state or federal funds were available when the CVS preliminary design was completed in 1990. In summer 1996, Senator Stanley Rosenberg placed potential authorization for \$3 million for an Amherst downtown parking garage in a state transportation bond. To obtain this money, Amherst must provide a 25% match to the funding (a minimum of \$1 million), prepare final plans and submit a successful grant application to the state's Off-Street Parking Program.

Eight communities, including Amherst, are named as eligible for just over \$19 million parking facility funds under the state transportation bond. Many other Massachusetts communities, including Northampton and Greenfield, are waiting to apply if the named communities do not act.

Informational Meetings

Since the October 1996 Town Meeting, the Amherst Parking Commission has sponsored a series of five (5) open public informational meetings on the potential parking garage sites (the Boltwood Walk, CVS, Amity and Pray Street sites were reviewed), overall downtown parking needs and other related issues.

SUMMARY OF PARKING ISSUES

The most common issues raised during these meetings fall into three broad categories:

1. **Do we need a downtown parking garage at all? Is our current parking system inadequate? If so, would other, non-garage solutions work? Are there other reasons why a garage is needed?**
2. **What's the best site for a downtown parking garage?**
3. **What are the potential impacts? What traffic impacts could be expected from a garage? What impact would a garage have on nearby (and overall) downtown development patterns and the quality of the downtown environment?**

DO WE NEED A GARAGE?

Yes, we do. Previous and current parking data indicates that the downtown parking supply is not adequate to meet the needs of many of those trying to use downtown Amherst, and cannot meet peak parking demands. Parking supply problems are most apparent in those areas of the downtown where demand is greatest, but are systemic. Since downtown Amherst is confined, any significant new parking supply will be provided in structures--decks and garages.

Parking data of three kinds has and is being generated and examined:

Gross Parking Demand

Gross parking demand is a rough theoretical measure--the maximum parking demand if all downtown uses were operating at full capacity all at once. This estimate is used because parking systems must be designed to accommodate peak demand.

The gross parking demand generated by all downtown uses far exceeds the available parking supply. Similar analyses in 1977 and 1984 also showed deficits. The downtown parking deficit has increased steadily over the past 20 years. The parking supply count has increased by only about 194 spaces during the same two decades. Even this is mostly the result of a more accurate count that includes side street parking. Amherst added some new meters, but built no new public parking spaces between 1977 and 1997.

Table 1. Gross Parking Demand - 1977-1997

Year	Gross Demand	Existing Supply	Estimated Deficit
1977	1,655	1,467	188
1984	1,756	1,467	289
1997	2,601	1,661	940

A conservative "guesstimate" of peak parking demand in downtown Amherst might be one in which three-quarters of all stores, restaurants and offices downtown were operating at full capacity at the same time. Three-quarters of the potential total parking demand (1,950 spaces) would result in a deficit of 290 parking spaces during peak use of downtown Amherst. There's just not enough parking.

Parking Counts

Parking counts can indicate actual demand, including peak times. The Planning Department began taking selected parking counts in December 1996 at the 3 potential garage sites. Counts were also taken in January during intersession, and will be taken when the colleges and University are back in session, to provide a broad sampling of parking levels and patterns at these sites.

Counts taken in December 1996 during the holiday shopping season show peak occupancies in both the Boltwood and CVS sites above 95%. Since 85% occupancy is considered to be "capacity," these counts show that there is not enough parking in the two areas of the downtown which hold the largest concentrations of public parking.

Counts taken during intersession show that only in the Boltwood site did peak occupancies remain above 85%. Peak levels at the CVS and Amity sites in this traditionally quiet time were for the most part between 60%-70%.

While parking counts reflect actual parking behavior, that behavior is a response to specific existing conditions--where people want to go, drivers' knowledge of the downtown, time pressures, etc. If conditions change, peoples' parking patterns may change. A parking garage, for instance, would become its own destination, and would change parking patterns elsewhere in the downtown.

Parking counts in February and March will provide a more accurate sense of "normal" parking levels and patterns.

Downtown Employee/Resident Parking

Downtown employees and residents represent the base level of downtown parking demand. But public parking is principally intended to serve the needs of shoppers, diners, tourists and other citizens visiting the downtown. In most communities, downtown employees and residents are discouraged from competing with shoppers and visitors for public parking. But other parking must exist for them to use.

There are about 880 downtown employees and residents in the commercial areas of downtown Amherst. Only about 430 downtown parking spaces are dedicated to downtown employee or resident use, leaving as many as 450 people needing long-term parking (reduced by the number who walk or take public transportation).

There are 273 unmetered parking spaces on side streets around the downtown, which serve some downtown employees and residents. But these spaces are also used by residents of those side streets and by those who park downtown and take the bus to the

University or elsewhere.

No single garage on any of the 3 sites will exceed 200 net new spaces. Any garage Amherst builds could be filled the day it opens with the vehicles of downtown employees and residents.

Alternative Solutions

The alternative (or, more often, a supplement) to providing new parking supply is to take steps to reduce parking demand. This is usually done by encouraging the use of public transit, ride-sharing, specialized transit services like park-and-ride shuttles and promoting alternative personal transportation like bicycles.

Public Transit - Public transit has long been a priority for Amherst, which has one of the largest, most convenient and inexpensive public transit systems of any community its size in the country. And yet downtown parking demand remains high, and continues to grow.

Park-and-ride shuttles and ride-sharing work in urbanized areas. Despite recent growth, Amherst and its downtown are not large enough to support these services.

Alternative Transportation - Almost 30 new bicycle racks will be added downtown in the next 2-3 years, through a grant from PVTa. In the long-term, bicycle paths and/or lanes will be added to streets and intersections as they are improved. This will likely include a connection between the downtown and the Norwottuck Rail Trail. Secure bicycle parking should be a feature of any downtown parking garage.

Improvements in public transit and alternative transportation must and will be pursued. But they will not significantly reduce downtown parking demand or change people's driving habits within the foreseeable future. Such improvements may be able to keep pace with the continuing growth in downtown parking demand, or even shrink it somewhat. But the existing parking deficit is big enough to absorb reduced demand and still present a problem. Amherst still needs to increase its downtown parking supply.

Other Reasons for a Parking Garage

Limited Parking Limits Downtown Diversity - The gross parking demand analysis also highlighted changes in the evolving mix of downtown uses since 1984. The nature of these changes imply that the stagnant parking supply (only about 50 new parking spaces since 1977) has contributed to a limited range of downtown shopping choices for Amherst residents.

Some uses, like retail stores, require adequate, convenient parking to survive. In downtown Amherst, they have been "selected against." The uses which now dominate the downtown can struggle along on a limited supply of parking--specialty "destination" stores, quality restaurants, coffee and pizza shops, and some professional offices. Some of their customers can walk downtown, take the bus, drive around looking for parking or park illegally and risk a parking ticket.

Increased Parking Supports All Downtown Activities - Traditionally, Amherst's downtown has provided a full range of community activities and services--shopping, dining, banking, medical and other professional services, the Post Office, the theater, the library, public safety stations, the community center and other municipal services. Downtown is also a gathering place for religious and cultural events and shared community celebrations. As Amherst grows, the downtown parking supply must keep pace with the community's increasing need to use its downtown.

Increased Parking Supports Needed Commercial Growth--Maintaining Amherst's community character and high quality services in the face of population growth and change is expensive. To balance the tax burden, some commercial activity must be allowed to succeed, somewhere.

Downtown Amherst is the traditional, logical place for local commerce to develop, grow and expand. Adequate parking is an essential part of the public infrastructure that supports commercial activity and growth, which in turn supports Amherst's public services--schools, library services, public safety, recreation, open space and conservation lands, and other important public programs.

WHAT'S THE BEST PARKING GARAGE SITE?

The three sites being considered for the first downtown parking garage--Boltwood, CVS and Amity--are all appropriate for increased, improved parking, and will be needed for this purpose as downtown Amherst grows. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Table 2 on Page 8 describes these differences.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Traffic Impacts

A parking garage on any of the three potential sites will increase traffic on nearby streets, and in the downtown generally--the question is by how much.

Traffic impact analyses conducted in 1990 by Abend Associates for the Amherst Parking Task Force showed that a garage in any of the 3 potential sites would have only a modest impact on downtown traffic levels and intersections:

"[We] . . . do not anticipate that any of the potential garage locations will adversely affect any of the count locations. . . . do not foresee these circulation changes [resulting from different garage sites] negatively impacting the counted locations insofar as Level of Service is concerned."

Traffic volume analysis of the central downtown intersection (Main/Pleasant/Amity Streets) was conducted in 1996 by Fuss & O'Neill, Inc. part of a planned intersection improvement project. Since 1990, traffic volumes had increased to an overall Level of Service (LOS) of "D," which is considered moderately heavy, but not unmanageable. The proposed intersection improvements are intended to reduce these levels.

However, an accurate assessment of the potential traffic impact of a parking garage on surrounding streets and intersections will require new analyses by traffic consultants.

Table 2. Garage Site Comparisons

FACTOR	CVS	AMITY	BOLTWOOD
Location in Downtown	Central	Least Central	Most Central
Ease of Access to the Site	Good	Good	Good
Other Appropriate Uses for the Site?	Few	Multi-Use Project Needed	Multi-Use Project Needed
Use Conflicts	Some, Mostly With Residential Uses	Some	Some
Serves Nearby Destinations	Jones Library St. Brigid's Strong House Many Stores/Offices	Jones Library Amherst Cinema Some Stores/Offices	Bangs Center Town Hall Many Stores/Offices
Parking Demand	Moderate Nearby Demand	Moderate Nearby Demand	Highest Nearby Demand
Likely Visual Impact	Least Intrusive (comm.) Most Intrusive (res.)	Most Intrusive (streetfront)	Somewhat Intrusive
Costs (Land Purchase & Construction)	Least Expensive	Expensive	Expensive
Complexity of Project	Least Complex	Complex	Complex
Other Issues	Existing Eminent Domain Authority (owner opposed)	Multiple Private Owners Possible Theater Project	Multiple Private Owners Finishes Urban Renewal Project

Development Impact

A parking garage in any of the 3 sites will support existing uses and spur redevelopment activity in its immediate surroundings. However, each site will have a different impact:

Boltwood Site

- * Serves largest concentration of existing uses and is closest to other areas of downtown. A parking garage on this site is needed and would be heavily used. However, high parking demand created by existing (and any new) uses in the Boltwood block will have the effect of consuming most or all new parking supply created by a garage. This will limit its beneficial effect elsewhere in the downtown, except for providing some relief from spillover parkers trying to use Boltwood Walk.
- * Highest potential to spur redevelopment on existing private properties in the block, especially along North Pleasant Street, and elsewhere downtown.

CVS Site

- * Central location serves many existing uses, but they are more widely scattered. Parking demand is correspondingly less intense than in Boltwood. New parking created here would not be immediately consumed by abutting uses, allowing more of it to be available to other areas of downtown. Serves most heavily-used Town facility, the Jones Library, with an annual average of 8,000+ visitors/week.
- * Close to both Boltwood and Amity blocks, as well as areas to the north. Will have a better secondary impact on existing and future parking demand on the entire downtown than the Amity site.
- * A garage here would likely spur redevelopment of commercial buildings on both sides of North Pleasant Street between Main/Amity Streets and Kellogg Avenue, and might speed redevelopment of the Amity site.

Amity Site

- * Serves the second highest concentration of immediately abutting uses (the block along South Pleasant Street facing the Common), and is within walking distance of both the Boltwood and CVS blocks.
- * Most distant site for other sections of downtown to the north. Likely to have little impact there.
- * Next to Boltwood, has the second largest potential for spurring redevelopment, especially on the site itself and in the rear of the South Pleasant Street block. However, a garage will need to be part of a larger redevelopment on the site, which is likely to be complex, expensive and requiring a lengthy joint public/private planning and development project.

Downtown Environment

Since 1973, Amherst has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in developing and planning Boltwood Walk as the downtown's principal pedestrian area--any proposed garage in this area must consider pedestrian design needs.

Other downtown streetscape improvements have been discussed and planned for decades. However, it was not until the 1992 Downtown Action Plan that downtown needs were comprehensively stated by the community and given a mechanism (the Town/Commercial Relations Committee) for action.

The Plan declares that downtown "should be planned and developed as an attractive, secure pedestrian environment . . . major and minor public open spaces strung together by a network of major pedestrian streetscapes and other pedestrian paths." It included many specific proposals for sidewalk and public open space improvements.

Many of these are already underway--public open space projects (Sweetser Park, Town Common, West Cemetery), a new sign system, intersection and accessibility improvements, cost-sharing for downtown street furniture, permanent public arts

installations, sidewalk redesign projects and others. Other improvements recommended in the Plan have been submitted for consideration and inclusion in the Town's capital budget for future years.

But the Downtown Action Plan addresses downtown needs comprehensively, and it also stresses the need for improved parking:

"Downtown Amherst is primarily a pedestrian area. It is served by a mass transit system that is unusually extensive and inexpensive for a community this size. Nonetheless, the vast majority of people coming downtown use their own cars. This cannot be expected to change until fundamental changes are made in federal and state transportation policy. For the foreseeable future, adequate parking for private vehicles will continue to be an essential element of the downtown.

In fact, the vitality of the downtown area depends upon an ample supply of parking that is easy to find, and within easy walking distance of shopping and major downtown destinations. [emphasis added] Retail uses are particularly dependent on nearby parking for their survival and success. Drivers must be able to find a space quickly and easily. This includes the constant stream of visitors to the colleges and tourists who have never been in Amherst before, as well as the many local residents who have no extra time to spend circling around looking for an open parking space.

The parking system must accommodate and encourage reasonable visit times by parkers, and must discourage misuse and abuse. Finally, the available supply of parking must keep up with demand."

